

## **Arctic Voyage**

*by Frank Start - VE3AJ*

This time my activities took a change of direction, instead of going south, I headed for the North Pole. In the early 1920's the Canadian Government required a ship to take supplies and relief personnel to the RCMP outposts in the eastern Arctic. I first became aware of this when a Toronto amateur was appointed for one of these trips. Bill Choat - VE3CO, who had a commercial ticket, joined C. G. S. "Arctic" for the 1924 voyage.

This ship was an old German built barquentine 165 feet long with a registered tonnage of 518. To help this ocean greyhound along when the wind failed it had a 275 hp steam engine. This was to be her last voyage in 1924 and it very nearly was. It was a hair raising experience for Bill and I don't think he ever went to sea again. He had to send an S. O. S. call and no one answered. He was heard by one U. S. Amateur who, not knowing what to do with it, advised Washington D. C. by mail. Bill has been an active amateur for years with the RSO as well as manager of the CNIB Amateur Radio Club.

I had the good fortune to be working out of Montreal in '29 and jumped at the opportunity to make the same voyage as Bill had made. That was before I had heard all the details of his trip.

As the "Arctic" had made her last voyage, she was being replaced by the "S/S Beothic" an ex-US ship JOB Bros. of Newfoundland, used normally in the annual seal hunt. I was surprised to learn that at one time the Wireless Operator had been David Sarnoff. In later days he became the head of the Radio Corporation of America.

This annual Arctic voyage starts officially from North Sydney, Cape Breton Island. But there was some additional radio gear to be installed in St. Johns to augment the old 1/2 kW spark set. So, I joined the ship at St. Johns. This being 1929, instead of flying from Montreal to St. Johns in a few hours, I relaxed on a deck chair of the S/S Rosiland visiting Charlottetown and St. Pierre en route to St. Johns. While in St. Johns I installed a long wave CW transmitter and a short wave transmitter working on 9.5 Megs, In 1929 they had not yet resurrected Heinrich Hertz. Only one frequency was available. Two short wave receivers of the T. R. F. type. The trip from St. Johns back to Sydney was uneventful except that we passed St. Paul's Island. A very small dot on the charts, a few miles from Cape North, Cape Breton Island. At North Sydney I found all hands busy completing preparations for the voyage.

As there was a possibility of the ship becoming stuck in the ice when moving around the more northern points, the ship takes on considerable stores to feed and cloth all on board for a long cold winter. Also, enough bunker coal to keep the ship's boiler supplied for the extra heating of the ship and its return trip. On completion of these preparations it was customary for the Mounties and the ship's crew to be invited to the North Sydney Yacht Club for a send-off party.

One of the highlights of the evening was showing moving pictures which had been taken during the previous year's voyage. This was followed by a social evening, dancing etc.

This 1929 voyage was under the command of Mr. George McKenzie, Department of the Interior.

The captain was Enoch Falk. Also on board were: RCMP Inspector A. H. Joy, Dr. Porsild (a Danish Scientist, Dr. P. Heinbecker of St. Louis and two Canadian artists A. Y. Jackson and Lawren Harris.

Our departure date was July 31. Full-away at 7:30 pm into the St. Lawrence and heading for the Strait of Belle Isle. The following day some tests were made with the short wave transmitter to adjust the aerals now that the ship's rigging was in its normal position. We had a good copy from G. R. B. Rugby. Also checked the long wave on 143 kcs for VAS Louisburg but was unable to copy, being too close and unable to change frequency. We passed Belle Isle and exchanged TR (position report) with VCM on 500 kcs. Some small icebergs around. The wind freshens and I think the North Atlantic is about to put on a display. The Beothic lacks bilge keels and is therefore prone to rolling. By midnight we have developed a good roll. It doesn't seem to matter how carefully you stow things away, the first roll will find something to upset. The following day the dirty weather continues. We are shipping water into the well decks fore and aft. At noon the ship is hove to while the lashings on the deck cargo are tightened. Oil drums come loose in the forward well deck and have to be rounded up and lashed down. This can be a tricky job as a loose oil drum washing around can be very dangerous.

The first 1700 miles of the voyage are proving to be very rough but another two or three days should see us in Godhavn, Greenland. Outside the weather is cold and dirty. Inside the radio shack it is either too hot or too cold. The weather is all on the port side so I have to keep the porthole closed. On the night shift it gets a bit tough to stay awake. I walk up and down the 3 by 7 foot space with the phones on, sometimes from hand hold to hand hold as the ship rocks to and fro. More than once I have been rudely awakened when my knees buckled. My first thoughts when this happens are, "I wonder what we've hit this time". Three or four days of this and we run into fog. We are now close to the Greenland coast. Having had no sun, we are not sure of our position. There are no aids for navigation or DF stations here. When the Captain reckons we are close to Godhavn we hope the fog will lift, which it does, and the Old Man's dead reckoning proves to be right on. We are at the entrance to Godhavn. No inhabitants visible, just the rocky shore with Greenland's icy mountains in the background. So we drop anchor in Godhavn, the Capital of Greenland, on the island of Disko. I was soon ashore and fortunate enough to get an invite to the home of Mr. Muller, Chief Operator of the wireless station located here. This was to be a typical Danish breakfast. The main course on the menu was whale steak. This proved to be very good and something like roast beef.

This being an auspicious occasion we indulged in an old Danish custom and toasted the good ship Beothic for its annual goodwill trip to Greenland. In the afternoon most of the inhabitants of the settlement and their offspring were brought on board for their annual movie show. The theatre was formed by hanging a large tarpaulin over the derrick booms on number one hatch. At Godhavn we picked up a German scientist and his Danish assistant plus their fourteen dogs. All going further north on a geological exploration from which they were never to return.

We cleared Godhavn in the evening and headed north. We are now 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle. I had a schedule with CFA on 9.5 M but ran into transmitter problems. I replaced a filter condenser and cleared the traffic. I also copied press from Rugby then turned in at two fifteen by the light of the midnight sun.

We are now heading west across Baffin Bay and passing through a large pan of floating ice and icebergs of various sizes. Roughly 600 miles of ploughing through ice and dodging icebergs, and arriving at Dundas Harbour, Devon Island. This is a small island between Ellesmere and Baffin Islands. Here we discharge supplies and made changes in the personnel at the RCMP post. Next day we went a bit further north to Cape Sparbo for a day of shooting musk oxen – with cameras. These animals are about the size of buffalo and can be rounded up with dogs. They gather in a close formation with the largest ones on the outside to protect the smaller animals.

They made a formidable array, when snorting and pawing the ground at a distance of fifty feet. Two men stood close by with rifles just in case the animals did not want to just get their pictures taken. There were no casualties and the men returned to the ship for supper.

The ship now headed into Smith Sound and anchored in Robertson Bay. Here we found two Eskimo families camped. This is where we left Dr. Kruger, his assistant and the dogs. They were to stay here all winter and then head over to Canada. The 14 dogs began a war with the Eskimo dogs who thought they owned Greenland. During our short stay here I walked up the shore with the Mounties who were getting a little bored with it all.

Back on ship, the weather is still cold and dirty. Inside the radio shack it's either too hot or too cold. The weather remains on the port side so I have to keep the porthole closed. We are headed for Etah Bay where many Arctic expeditions have based their operations before heading to the North Pole. We found the place completely deserted. We now turned and headed for Ellesmere Island, crossing Smith Sound and heading for the most northerly RCMP Post at Bache Peninsula. The bay in which the post is located was so packed with ice we had to anchor at a convenient spot and unload the supplies on the shore. The Mounties will have to haul the supplies to the post by dog team.

We are now at our most northerly point, about 780 miles from the North Pole. To celebrate, the ship's Doctor jumped overboard for a swim and broke all records for getting back to the ladder and on board. From this point I had no trouble working Louisburg and schedules were maintained daily. In tuning around on the Grebe receiver one day I picked signals from the Byrd Expedition in the Antarctic.

From Bache we headed south to Lancaster Sound then turned west to Melville Island. Here we had icefields to contend with but kept going all night in the midnight sun. In this area we had the experience of seeing the compass heading due south instead of north. At that time the magnetic pole was on Boothia Peninsula about 300 miles south of us. In approaching Melville Island we had a scare when we nearly ran aground. The Admiralty charts for this area were made up in the early 1800's at the time of the search for the Franklin Expedition. This would have been a bad place to spend the winter.

We now start on the return half of the voyage. The RCMP posts at Ponds Inlet and Pangnirtung on Baffin Island are attended to and we call in at Resolution Island at the entrance to Hudson's Strait. Here we found a Direction Finding Station under construction. The island is a barren pile of rocks. Even the sand had to be brought in from Quebec. A desolate spot for three operators to

spend a year. The monotony of the trip was somewhat relieved on the occasion when an operator ex Port Arthur was mauled by a polar bear.

From Resolution Island we continued along Hudson's Strait to Lake Harbour, the location of another RCMP post on the south shore of Baffin Island.

We continued on to Hudson Bay. At Chesterfield Inlet we found much activity. The two storey hospital is nearly completed and is probably the tallest building north of Winnipeg. A new radio station is also under construction. The weather was bad here and delayed the unloading of construction supplies. Captain Falk complains about the weather forecasts, and that is not unusual.

On the home stretch now with two more stops. During the last few days there have been many changes at the dining room table. We now have a new Ship's Doctor, replacing the wild one that jumped overboard near the pole. The RCMP personnel are all new faces going back to civilization after one or two years with Eskimos.

We make a brief stop at Coats Island in Hudson Bay and heading east. The weather is cold and wet. The racks are on the table again and one has to be fast to scoop up the soup before it goes over the edge. Another quick turnaround at Point Burwell at the top of Labrador where the last RCMP post is situated.

On the homeward stretch down the Labrador coast the Atlantic is in a bad mood. I was awakened one morning by loud noises from the next cabin. The new occupants had left the porthole open and had an unexpected bath when a generous portion of the ocean came aboard. With this kind of weather, when one can't sit comfortably in a chair during a watch period, you get a good book and wedge yourself in somewhere.

So – finally we get back to North Sydney. ... having been away for about two months and covering 7800 miles... END.